

Chapter 1

RECORDS AND ARCHIVISTS

Records¹

In a complex literate society, people and organizations create and use records as a regular and routine part of daily existence. Historically, records have assumed a wide variety of formats, ranging from clay tablets to Oracle databases, yet despite this diversity, the role that records play has remained constant; they act as a secure and unwavering “extension of human memory.”² As a memorializing device, records provide evidence of our activities, thoughts, and relationships as well as information about the people, places, and events that we have encountered and experienced.

A record is not a singular thing. It is created, used, and often kept in a broader documentary context as a collection of letters, receipts, checkbooks, financial records, house files, military records, etc. Thus, it is rendered most meaningful, not as an isolated text, but as a part of a documentary stream or mosaic. Of course, there are isolated instances of important singular documents—The Declaration of Independence and North Carolina’s Copy of the Bill of Rights, are good examples of records that have great value as iconic documents. Their value, however, is located less in the specific information that they convey, than in some aspect of their uniqueness as an historical item.

All records have value to their creator at the moment of creation, but this value, while indisputably real, is often transitory in nature. Imagine the grocery list that lies crumpled in your pocket; it was truly invaluable while you were shopping, but it serves very little purpose now. Records with a fleeting value are sometimes referred to as temporary records. These sorts of documents are not normally of great interest to archivists. Archivists strive to identify, collect, preserve and make accessible Historical Records.

Historical Records

These documents are generated in the same manner as mere records, but for a variety of reasons their value transcends both the moment of their use and their original intended audience. They are judged to have “enduring historical value” and are normally referred to as Archival or Historical

¹ This chapter is heavily based on text, exercises and outlines created by Hal Keiner.

² The Society of American Archivists maintains an online “Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology.” The quote above is taken from its rather extensive definition of records at http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=54

Records. Historical Records have four essential qualities; they are unique, non-current, authentic, and they have “enduring value.” Let’s examine these attributes in more detail.

- **Historical records are unique documents.** These original records were normally created as a singular item by their creator to convey information or to record information for later use. This is not meant to imply that copies of a record may not exist, only that the version closest to the moment of creation is the most historical and, thus, from the archivist’s point of view, most desirable.
- **Historical records are non-current documents.** Historical records are no longer being actively used by their creator.
- **Historical records are authentic documents.** Records that have been created, collected, and preserved in a known manner are accepted as legitimate evidence or proof of past events and decisions. This is especially relevant with regard to documents (marriage records, deeds, legal papers, medical or schools records, etc.) created in an institutional context.
- **Historic records have enduring value.**³ Enduring value is the phrase that archivists use to describe their assessment that a record has significance that transcends the original purpose of a document. This significance is normally understood to mean that as a cultural and informational artifact, a record tells us about the past in a manner and fashion that researchers (other than the creator) would find interesting and useful.

Three Types of Historical Records in North Carolina

Three basic types of historical records are typically found in North Carolina archival repositories: Manuscripts, Archives, and Government Records. The distinction among these three groups of historical records is not necessarily immediately apparent and requires a brief discussion

Archivists call the historical records generated by individuals or families “Manuscripts.” This designation, as with the two others, is tied directly to the nature of the document or collection’s creator. It does not suggest anything about the types of materials that are present. Indeed, the correspondence, financial records, photographs, and other materials likely to be found in a Manuscripts Collection are also found in the two other types of record groupings.

The historical records generated and kept by a public or private organization to document its activities and history are called “Archives.” Many organizations, such as hospitals, churches, schools, universities, and businesses, maintain institutional archives of their historical records.

Documents produced by governments are called “Government Records.” This is a rigid legal category because state, county, and municipal records are all subject to the North Carolina Public

³ The process of evaluating the historical value of records is called, “Appraisal.” The importance and process of Appraisal is discussed more fully in the second chapter of this manual.

Records Law.⁴ Among this law's provisions is a prescribed set of procedures that manages a record from its creation to its destruction or retention. Only a small percentage of public records are designated for permanent retention. At the local level these records include documents such as deeds, records of the tax assessor, marriage records, and estate and probate records. Pre-1868 records in these categories have been sent to the State Archives for safe storage and microfilming.

Who Uses Historical Records?

In a sense, this is a bit of a rhetorical question. The answer is that at some point almost everyone will need to consult a historical record of some sort. Having said this, there are subsets of the community that will use historical records with a much greater degree of frequency and intensity. Obvious users include:

- Amateur and Professional Historians and other Scholars
- Authors
- Genealogists
- Museum or Historical Society Staff
- Journalists
- Managers and Administrators
- Lawyers
- Students and Teachers

The research projects that can be accomplished using a repository's records are extremely varied and wildly unpredictable. In archival theory, there has been an attempt to group the wide variety of roles that historical records play in the work of their users into three broad categories:

- **Research Value:** This category encompasses such things as: genealogical research into your family's past; conducting scholarly research; uncovering the details necessary to restore your house; determining the proper uniform for an historical drama, etc.
- **Administrative Value:** This category deals with the use of historical records to conduct your current operations. A church faced with a certain set of circumstances might look to its records to see how similar problems were faced in the past.
- **Legal Value:** This category deals with the use of historical records to meet legal requirements. Examples might include: a tax audit; records of product testing, etc.

Given the breadth of possibilities, it would not be exceptional for a large repository to be able to:

- Supply a researcher with the proof necessary to join a lineage society;
- Provide a business with guidance during a labor crisis, by providing copies of internal reports describing previous labor disputes; and
- Uncover evidence that an ancestor had donated land to the University.

⁴ The North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources maintains an electronic version of the North Carolina State Public Records Law (North Carolina General Statutes 132) at <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/e-records/ncgs/ncgs132.htm>

Where are Historical Records Found?

As the preceding has suggested, because of the ubiquitous nature of records in our society and the corresponding impulse to research and memorialize the past, there are few localities in our state without an historical records collection of some sort. In the past few years, North Carolina ECHO (Exploring Cultural Heritage Online) has surveyed our state to locate and describe all of the caretakers of North Carolina's Cultural Heritage.⁵ A quick perusal of this list surely suggests that historical records are kept in all manner of places. An extensive, but by no means exhaustive list includes:

- Archives and Manuscript Repositories
- Businesses
- Educational Institutions
- Public Libraries
- Museums
- Historic Homes or Sites
- Non-Profit Organizations
- Historical and Genealogical Societies
- Government Offices
- Hospitals
- Religious Institutions

Regardless of their size, funding, or institutional mission, all keepers of historical records share three essential goals:

- To identify and collect records of enduring value;
- To preserve these records; and
- To make these records available to their researchers.

Who is an Archivist?

An archivist is a person whose work supports the goals that were expressed above—namely, to identify, preserve, and make available historical records. This definition purposely defines an archivist in functional terms, for archivists are defined more by the work that they do, than by the particular degrees that they have earned. The purpose of this manual and the workshop series from which it evolved is to provide North Carolinians who are engaged in archival endeavors with the information necessary to care for their historic collections. All of the keepers of historical records are archivists.

⁵ The results of NC ECHO's survey are online at <http://www.ncecho.org>

Exercise: Identifying Historical Records

Are the following documents historical records? Under what circumstances would they be considered historical records? Discuss the role that a document's context plays in assessing its historical nature.

- Last week's grocery list
- North Carolina's Copy of the Bill of Rights
- The latest Britney Spears' Album
- Report, *The Sterilization of Lunatics and Mental Incompetents*, North Carolina Department of Health, 1923.